

## On Happiness and High Achievement

### An Interview with Michael Thompson

Michael G. Thompson knows independent schools. He attended them in elementary and secondary school, and has worked in them as a psychologist. He consults with more than 30 schools a year, addressing a myriad of issues related to complex human interaction. He has written often in *Independent School* about everything from understanding the social lives of children, to educating boys, to dealing with difficult parents, to gracefully managing the college admissions vortex. Thompson is the coauthor (with psychiatrist Edward M. Hallowell) of *Finding the Heart of the Child*, published by the National Association of Independent Schools, though he has attracted more attention in recent years for his groundbreaking book on boys, *Raising Cain*, coauthored with Dan Kindion. This past fall, Thompson published *Speaking of Boys*, a collection of thoughtful questions and answers regarding the development of boys. His newest book, *Best Friends/Worst Enemies: Friendship, Popularity and Social Cruelty in the Lives of Children*, coauthored with Catherine O'Neill Grace, is due out in August of this year.

Given his busy schedule, we were lucky to track him down recently to ask some questions related to this issue's theme on stress and pressure.

**Independent School:** In all your visits to independent schools, what do you see as the greatest concerns of administrators and faculty members?

**Michael Thompson:** When I conduct a full-day workshop with faculty members, I ask them to tell me the strengths and struggles of their school. All schools have strengths they should rightfully extol. Independent schools do so much right. When it comes to their struggles, nine out of ten schools say it's a struggle for time. There is not enough time to do all the things they feel they should do. It's true from big schools to small schools, boarding schools to day schools. There is a sense of pressure to try to get so much done. I don't think it was always this way. In years past, teaching used to be a more leisurely profession. Not that it was ever easy, but there is definitely greater anxiety about time today. Schools keep adding good program after good program and tend not to take anything away. As one head said to me, "We are simply incapable of cutting things because everybody has a vested interest in some aspect of the program." I have a Buddhist friend who said to me, referring to my life, "When you stack so many good things one on top of the other, at a certain point they all become not so good any more." This is the thing that independent schools struggle with. And I have yet to see a school attack it successfully.

**Independent School:** Why is that? If overloading the program is such an obvious problem in so many schools, why can't schools find a way to reduce the pressure?

**Michael Thompson:** It's a cultural problem ? for parents, administrators, teachers, and kids. I have a friend who sent his two children to a prestigious boarding school. He said about the school, "They offer a wonderful education, and I'm very glad my kids went there. But it is boot camp training for upper-middle class life." As a description of an independent school, it took my breath away. Boot camp training for upper-middle class life. The problem is that we are getting kids ready for high pressured lives and we can't stop thinking that there is one more thing our kids will need to know in order to succeed in those lives. So we keep adding to the program. We feel our children need to know *this*, and they need to know *this*, and they need to know *this*, and they really need to know *this*, and we would be doing them a great injustice if we didn't teach them *this* and *this*. And so on.

**Independent School:** Some argue that the real source of pressure in schools is parents.

**Michael Thompson:** There's truth to this. But I wouldn't lay all the blame on parents. They are only acting within the broader culture. It's interesting to note that independent school parents feel the pressure, too. The parents' association at Lakeside School in Seattle wanted to talk with me once about this issue. They asked me, "Can you tell us how to make Lakeside a more mellow place?" I was in an ironic mood at the time, so I said: "Look, from what the faculty tells me, the people in Seattle are killing to get their kids into Lakeside. In the admission season, the Lakeside admission office is a tense place. The admissions people don't go to grocery stores during the day out of fear of being accosted. Faculty members are getting letters and phone calls from anxious parents asking for help. And when the letters of acceptance and rejection go out, people are upset all over town. Do you think ? given the competitive nature of the admissions process and, therefore, of the families accepted into the school ? that it's possible for the school to be laid back?" Most independent schools self-select students from families that want academic intensity. Bill Gates and Paul Allen graduated from Lakeside. These are iconic figures, major players in running the world. Most independent schools have their lists of highly successful alumni ? and they are proud of them. In such an atmosphere, it's very hard to relax.

**Independent School:** You are describing an essential nature of independent schools as intensely competitive places. But the

intensity seems to have increased in recent years. Why?

**Michael Thompson:** Independent schools have always had a highly competitive edge to them relative to the broader culture. What has changed ? what has added an extra level of intensity ? is the nature of the families who send their children to independent schools. There was a time when the significant majority of parents who sent their children to independent schools themselves came from wealth. And attendance at such a school was like a club membership. To the extent that something is clubby, people are less anxious about it. The mind-set was not so much that they were sending their children to a particular school because they wanted their children to get "somewhere" in life. They were already somewhere in life. It was more a sense of legacy, a feeling that this is just what we do, what we've always done. But that is not true of the modern independent school family. The majority of parents today did not attend independent schools. So for them, their children's attendance at an independent school is a very different thing. It's a purchase of an education for their children that is different from the education the parents received. And it's crucial, in their minds, that they get a return on their investment.

**Independent School:** So it's the consumer mentality driving all this?

**Michael Thompson:** David Brooks starts off his book, *BOBOS in Paradise*, with a chapter on the rise of the educated class. And he conducts his research by studying *The New York Times* wedding pages. It's brilliant. He studies the wedding pages from the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, and starting in the mid-sixties there is a dramatic decline in the number of people requesting that the *Times* cover their wedding. Throughout the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, there are few wedding announcements. Then in the 1990s there is a steep rise in the announcements again. Everybody wants his or her wedding in *The New York Times*. What is most interesting is that the nature of the announcements has completely changed. In the fifties and sixties, the announcements spoke mostly of lineage. The bride was the daughter of so-and so and the grand- daughter of the famous so-and-so. Now, the focus is on résumés. The bride went to Duke and Northwestern Business School and the groom went to Dartmouth College and the Fletcher School of Diplomacy, etc. It's Brooks' proof that what matters now is one's achievement in education. It's the rise of an educated class. In a way, this is the sort of meritocracy many of us believe in. However, there is a greater anxiety in the educated, upper-middle class society about hanging on to one's earned status. The difference is that the wealthy used to be able to keep their kids in inherited wealth. But you can't keep your kids in the educated class ? unless, of course, you provide them with the best education. I'm not a sociologist and I shouldn't be talking about this. But this is very informative to me. David Brooks writes, "Members of today's educated class can never be secure about their own future. A career crash can be just around the corner. In the educated class, even social life is a series of aptitude tests." I think that does explain the ratcheting up of the intensity. It's unattractive, maybe, but there it is.

**Independent School:** It's unattractive, yet it gets people where they want to go in life. So it sounds as if there is no alternative except to submit to it, to compete.

**Michael Thompson:** That's the very reason we have trouble figuring out a way to discard anything in a school program. We don't have a clear idea of what an alternative looks like. We don't really have an idea, except, perhaps, in schools that are designed to be counter-cultural to regular independent schools. Schools that focus on the arts, for instance.

**Independent School:** And yet independent school families, generally speaking, are not the counter-culture types.

**Michael Thompson:** It's true. When I was the psychologist for an academically powerful school in Boston, I'd interview members of the ninth-grade class. When I'd ask them why they were here, 95 percent of them said, "To get into a good college." They knew their parents sent them here to get them into a "good" college. That's what a preparatory school does. The education that kids in the top honors programs in many public high schools receive compares with anything any independent school offers. But I think the great value added for independent schools, speaking in the crassest terms, is to take a kid who might have been a B student in his or her local public high school and turn him or her into a B student in an independent school. Then that student will be able to get into a college that is considered better than the one they would have been accepted into with a public school education. Independent learners will learn anywhere. They are driven by curiosity and the success they feel daily in school. The biggest return on investment in independent schools is to gear-up a kid who in another environment might not be geared-up. That is viewed from the view of parental investment. It's not my view. I think the reason to send your child to an independent school is the chance to form relationships with teachers.

**Independent School:** Where did you send your own kids to school?

**Michael Thompson:** I have a daughter at Cushing Academy and a son at Cambridge Montessori School.

**Independent School:** What was your thinking in choosing schools for your children?

**Michael Thompson:** The gods helped me out here. The fates arranged to give me perspective. My wife and I couldn't have our own children. We waited a long time, then we adopted. I was thirty-eight when my daughter came and forty-four when my son came. We were so grateful to have a family and so excited to be able to choose schools for them, schools that we would have liked ourselves. However, the fates saw to it that two Ph.D. parents had children with multiple learning disabilities. For my wife and I, school worked. But for our children, traditional schools don't work. When we saw that school wasn't working for our kids,

we started looking at alternatives. Basically, we asked ourselves, "Well, what's important, the prestige of the school or the quality of their education, which includes their happiness in school?" Our children proved to us that our values, in regard to education, were out of whack. We had to readjust our thinking about schools. I wrote a piece for Independent School years ago, which I think you rejected....

**Independent School:** Sorry about that.

**Michael Thompson:** ... It was about why I wouldn't send my LD child to an independent school. I wrote at the time that we took our daughter out of her first independent school and put her in public school. We wanted her to be with more kids like herself. When the special education service in the public schools in our town started to fall apart, we moved her to an extraordinary specialized school for learning disabled children, the Carroll School. There, in three years, they taught her strategies that allowed her to return to a mainstream school. Now it turns out that she is in a perfect place, and it happens to be an independent school. Cushing Academy can take an LD kid and support her and let her play athletics. It's a great place. My daughter calls us up every few days to say, "Mom and Dad, thank you. This is a wonderful school for me. The kids here are just like me." What my kids taught me is to look at many other dimensions of school life, not just academic competitiveness.

**Independent School:** It sounds as if you favor independent schools that offer alternative programs.

**Michael Thompson:** It's best if there are a variety of independent schools that can serve a variety of children ? the high academic achiever, students with ADHD, artistic children. With all due respect to the academically elite schools out there ? what one head referred to as "the muscle schools" ? I think the great diversity of styles of schools is the true strength of the independent school world. But I'm really talking about what I see as the most important aspect of education, and that is human relationships. Probably the best educational experience of my life was the years I attended Millbrook School. And what got me through were the relationships I had with my teachers. I had interesting, dedicated people in my life. Millbrook was not really an academically hard-driven school, but I had teachers with passion who showed me something of themselves. For my children what I want is a school where they will have good relationships with people who share their lives and what they love, who are willing to be in a relationship with an adolescent. There is so much more to school than academics. That's a truth we keep having to re-find.

**Independent School:** Have we lost the thread here? How do we connect this back to our discussion of pressure on students?

**Michael Thompson:** It's all connected. We're talking about the pressure we put on kids for high academic achievement, which is narrowly focused on individual achievement. If the pressure is all about individual excellence, that can be very hard on kids, and not educationally wise. If you are to leaven individual achievement with some experiences on behalf of the community, you are better off. Let's just take the very ordinary act of waiting on tables. You can't be fabulously good at it. Or, if you are, nobody cares. It's a true democratic experience. A leveler. It also changes your notion of time. You can't be advancing yourself when you're waiting on tables, so it gets you away from yourself momentarily. At Millbrook, we had a zoo, which is a very unusual thing for a school. But it was great. Taking care of the animals was, without a doubt, one of the most powerful experiences of my life. Taking care of animals changes the pace of life. Community service changes the pace of life. Working for the disadvantaged changes the pace of life. An educator whom I respect enormously says that the most important experiences of his life were a summer job where he walked behind a garbage truck in the summer, picking up trash, and the weekends when he helped his veterinarian father clean up cages at an animal hospital. These are experiences in which you can't really strive. And I think you should have days, or parts of days, when you can't strive.

**Independent School:** There are some who think that kids in school are motivated too much by the fear of failure rather than the love of learning, and that this adds a tremendous amount of pressure to their day. Does this match your observations?

**Michael Thompson:** I want to jump on board and say, yes, isn't that terrible. However, the fact remains that I do think that many kids want to do well so their parents won't get upset. Children often work because they are scared about an upcoming test. I now accept the fact that most kids in school are not driven to do well in academics by natural curiosity, by the desire to learn. There are moments when they are. A particular teacher may excite them (and, given my response to a previous question, I certainly hope one does). But it is difficult to sustain motivation in school, which is, after all, run by adults for adult goals. For many children, natural curiosity and the desire for mastery are what they experience during the hours on their computers at home. By and large, kids come to school because they want to see their friends. They want to hang out with people their own age. And, to their way of thinking, that is the greatest aspect of compulsory education ? all these young people in one place. The rest is just this big, annoying plot by adults. Formal education in school is a very unnatural thing, don't you think?

**Independent School:** Everything about school seems unnatural to me.

**Michael Thompson:** It shouldn't be a surprise that it takes something unnatural to soup kids up the way we want them souped up all the time.

**Independent School:** Don't you worry about kids who are driven by fear?

**Michael Thompson:** Of course I do. But as long as there is a lot of joy in their lives, a little fear of failure isn't a traumatic thing. As

a psychologist, I've worked with many kids for whom school is a painful ordeal and I know you've got to take this seriously. I have to help families where the parents keep raising the bar and shaming their children to work harder to clear this new height. But, for the average kid, I do think the fear of failure can help to get them away from the TV and Nintendo when nothing else will. We can say on an idealistic basis that we want children to be driven by the intrinsic love of learning. But sometimes that isn't quite enough. Like everything, it's a matter of degrees. I don't see the average independent school student in emotional stress from external forces pushing him or her in school, or perhaps I should say I trust children to fight us off when we're excessive and oppressive. What we need to respect is that wisdom in our students.

**Independent School:** You said earlier, in response to a question, that you are not a sociologist, but a psychologist. As a psychologist what are your concerns for independent schools today?

**Michael Thompson:** My concern is that if parents continue to pressure for more and more academic excellence, and schools continue to add more enriched activities to their schedules, that students will eventually be unable to savor anything. In short, I worry that they will become psychologically overwhelmed and burned out. If that happens, what is precious about independent education will be lost to them. From my point of view, the best thing about small schools is the relationships that develop between students and teachers. My former head said that teaching was "knowledge transmitted through personality." The allegiance of alums in independent schools to their former teachers is implicit support for that view.

Earlier this fall, a senior in a New York school told me he had had an SAT tutor for 18 months and had taken 30 practice SAT tests. Do you think it was possible for him to fully engage in his junior or senior year at his fine school while he is so focused on practice test-taking? If he gets into a good college, do you think that anyone will be able to say what he lost in the process? I believe that what he might have lost is the opportunity to enjoy his education, the opportunity to be excited about literature or science. He may have lost the opportunity to have some meaningful conversations with his teachers. The central lesson of his junior and senior year is that school is a college-entrance test and nothing more. He may have learned to be dutiful, bored, and joyless. These may appear to be subtle losses, but I think not. It seems to me that what schools want to produce are students who are excited about intellectual issues, about the give-and-take with a teacher, about the excitement of learning from their friends and participating on teams. Too much pressure, whether it is exerted by parents or by the schools themselves, is going to mean that the memories children will have of their school years will be about responding to that pressure, period. What a loss for kids.

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